Left Caucus Newsletter

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Greening the NDP through Workers' Control

By Ron Bobker
Oakville NDP

A review of the policy proposal: "Greening the Party, Greening the Province: A vision for the Ontario NDP". This policy proposal was coordinated by Doug Macdonald and written principally by Philip Jessup.

My first impression upon reading the report was that, at last, the ONDP establishment has realized that the root cause of Canada's environmental disaster is the capitalist system. In the preface to the report, Bob Rae writes: "The view of people as endless consumers, as calculators, as atoms all competing for material success is seen not just as shallow and inadequate, but as dangerous. We can't afford an unlimited capitalism: left to its devices it will destroy the planet and all of us who live on it." Presumably, anyone who agrees with this viewpoint is morally bound to do something about limiting capitalism as a first step to preventing planetary destruction. Bob Rae tells us: "This paper seeks to spark a debate, and our party must be a leader in the debate. There is an urgent, compelling need to change the society in which we live... The appetite to consume is satisfied at the expense of the rest of the world, and ... of future generations." And again, he writes: "While traditional social democratic values have been based on premises about growth, and the central questions about how power is divided and shared between people, the new environmental ethic requires that we re-examine the quality of our present growth and rethink its meaning to include our relationship to the land, the earth, the air, the water, and to future generations... Our party's responsibility is to explain why we take controversial stands, not to back away from them because of conflict. In doing so we are keeping faith with the best traditions of our party, and equally important, with the people whose interests we are fighting to protect."

Bob asks, "Are we ready to become a green party?" If no, he says, then we are on apparently safe ground because fewer changes will be required, but at the price of leadership "in the creation of a new consciousness, a new awareness, a new politics." If yes, "then we are talking about a party with a different value system... It is certainly no guarantor of electoral success, but it does mean renewed leadership for the party on issues that move millions of Canadians...."

Thus, belatedly, Bob Rae has accepted what the Left Caucus has always said: namely, the NDP must stake out its policy on an ideology of change and progress, and not on electoral expediency.

The content of the report is rich in slogans, but poor in imaginative programming. For example, the **Executive Summary** states that working people "have learned from experience how easily corporations exploit concern for a cleaner environment by holding workers, communities, and governments to ransom." But under the heading **Reform of the Economic System** it talks about "reducing the province's energy intensity (sic) by 3.5 per cent per year" and by fostering the growth of private energy service companies that are allowed to com-

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National Action Committee on the Status of Women President, Judy Rebick, a Left Caucus supporter, joins New Democrat MP Dawn Black in supporting NDP leader Audrey McLaughlin's strong stand for freedom of choice.

Is socialism dead in Eastern Europe?

By Harry Kopyto
St. Paul's NDP

On the surface, the political movement sweeping East Europe appears to be a reaction against socialism to which some defenders of the status quo in Canada have already gleefully administered the last rites. Many anti-Stalinist forces have called for the creation of a free market, loosening of state controls, elimination of central planning and introduction of private property to eliminate the economic crisis and drop in growth that has fueled the current crisis. Notably, few have called for the abolition of state subsidies for food and shelter, health and transportation and the policy guaranteeing employment to all.

These "benefits" have been central to the industrial progress made by the East European countries since WWII. By mobilizing all of society's resources, minimal standards of literacy, health and education were established virtually overnight. The transformation of these technologically backward countries into industrialised states was compressed into a few short decades with the development of massive extraction projects and heavy industrialisation through social direction.

However, Soviet Russia nurtured privileged bureaucracies in the East European countries, which usurped power from the nascent workers' movement, banned opposition currents, abolished independent anti-fascist movements, and imposed their own home-bred leaders on the East European governments. Ruthless dictatorship, national oppression, suppression of critical thought, regimentation of scientific, cultural and artistic opinions and the physical annihilation of all those who opposed Stalin made a mockery of a liberatory socialism and deformed the achievements of socialist property relations beyond recognition.

From the mid-1920's onward, Stalinism discredited socialism throughout the world. Anti-Communism was exploited for decades by proponents of capitalism in order to smear political parties such as the NDP and identify all efforts to create a socialist society with the caricature of socialism in the Soviet Union and East Europe.

The leaders of the regimes of the West, epitomised by West Germany's Helmut Kohl, have exploited the disintegration of the East European economies and the yearning of the masses for an increase in their standard of living to elect their surrogates.

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Lessons of Nicaraguan defeat

By Jeff Smith
Glendon College New Democrats

Socialists the world over suffered a stunning setback when Violeta Chamorro, candidate of the U.S.-financed National Opposition Union (UNO), soundly defeated incumbent President Daniel Ortega of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in the Nicaraguan election.

The Feb. 25 election result was contrary to all expectations.

The inhabitants of this tiny country of a few million, having suffered a decade of war and imperialist intervention including the mining of its harbors by U.S. ships, having experienced an economic blockade by the U.S. government, having suffered a disastrous earthquake and a hurricane, food and fuel shortages, and relentless sabotage by the U.S. government's Contra mercenaries, finally succumbed to desperation. The people voted for the hope of a way out of the economic morass of hyperinflation and deprivation. The majority thought that the Sandinistas could do no more to improve the situation.

Many socialists active in solidarity movements with Latin American revolutionary struggles had pinned their hopes on the Nicaraguan revolution because of its exemplary role as a popular revolution which respected pluralism and waged an uncompromising struggle against imperialism. The valiant efforts of the Nicaraguan people were insufficient to overcome the obstacles in isolation. An indicator of the magnitude of devastation the Nicaraguans had to put up with was the World Court's assigning of some U.S.$9 billion in reparations against the U.S. government for the damage it inflicted on Nicaragua.

The Sandinistas received lots of moral support, to be sure, from solidarity activists. But the war and economic blockade had a bigger impact. The Nicaraguans were able to get some military and economic support from the Cubans and the Soviet Union. However, even this support declined as the years wore on. The Sandinistas were pressured by U.S. imperialism and its Latin American allies into making major concessions to the Contras through the Arias Peace Accords, which included lifting the state of emergency, providing amnesty to prisoners who had the blood of the Nicaraguan people on their hands, and allowing more legal freedom for them to act within Nicaraguan territory. The Sandinistas, on the eve of the election, had even gone so far as to sign the San Isidro Accord which gave legitimacy to the repressive military dictatorship in El Salvador as a democratically elected government and called upon the guerrillas of the FMLN to disarm.

None of this worked in the Sandinistas' favor, of course. Nor were the Sandinistas aided by their adherence to economic concessions to the local capitalists, except in limited circumstances. Although they had compromised with elements of the Nicaraguan capitalist class in order to use the market to stimulate investment and develop the productive forces of the economy, they were faced with a flight of capital between 1979 and 1988 of U.S.$1.7 billion, according to a 1988 report of the Managua-based CRIES Research Institute. Throughout the 10 years of the Nicaraguan Revolution, the Nicaraguan capitalists acted as the internal agents of U.S. imperialism.

In order to induce the capitalists to continue, the Nicaraguan workers and peasants had to shoulder the burden of the increasing hardships and austerity. FSLN Commander Tomas Borge, in an interview published in *New Left Review* (July-Aug. 1987), stated that the Sandinistas had "sacrificed the working class" in pursuit of their alliance with the capitalists. Thus in 1988-89, the Nicaraguan government imposed austerity policies which were met with bitter strikes by the Nicaraguan working class. Most of the working-class districts of Managua, Leon, and the other main cities voted overwhelmingly for Chamorro.

And while the Sandinistas did distribute land to approximately 70,000 farm families, they failed to do anything for another 60,000 farm families. These disillusioned people also turned to UNO in the hope of securing a better life.

Faced with the immense devastation left by the Somoza dictatorship at the start of the revolution, a legacy of poverty, ignorance and disease, the Sandanistas, in the early years, had given new hope and provided a promising beginning. But the continued isolation of the revolution, together with the terrible economic and diplomatic pressures, including a 1988 inflation rate of 36,000% (*New York Times,* Nov. 7/89) which resulted in a decline of workers' real wages by 90% since 1981, were too much to carry the Sandinistas for another six years in government. The U.S.-backed UNO coalition bought an electoral victory by promises of peace and an end to austerity.

The struggle is far from over. Although the revolutionary army, the gains of the peasantry, and the independence of the trade unions are profoundly threatened, they remain intact for the present. The Sandanista revolution is unlikely to be dismantled without great resistance and the Chamorro coalition, already wracked by dissent, will find it difficult to stabilize the political situation when the people realize that they placed false hope in her victory.

The defeat of the Sandanista government is a defeat for all socialists. Their isolation will be pierced by struggling for socialism in the bastions of capitalism. Our task in Canada is to win a labor government through the NDP. Such a government would provide the foundation to break the economic and political monopoly of imperialism, undermining its ability to snuff out the socialist aspirations of Third World revolutions.

Charles Roach, left and Dudley Laws, speak out at a Black Action Defence Committee press conference. Along with others, such as NDP member Lennox Farrell, the BADC is spearheading efforts to structure and maintain ongoing protests against four unwarranted shootings of Blacks in Toronto during the last one and a half years and institutionalized racism such as an uncritical Royal Ontario Museum display of efforts by missionaries to "civilize" Africans. Hundreds of Blacks have attended these rallies. An elected united front leadership is in the offing. The NDP could tap this natural constituency by opening up the Party to visible minority candidates in the upcoming provincial elections and raise the Black community's demand for an independent investigative civilian board to review complaints against police.

Defend francophone rights

By Bill Clinton
Scarborough-Ellesmere NDP

Beginning in February, local councils in Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay, and dozens of other cities and towns passed resolutions declaring their areas solely and officially English speaking, banning municipal services in French. Alberta has declared English its only official language. Skinheads in Laval burned a Québec flag, sparking a riot between French and English-speaking high school students. A francophone laborer at the Abitibi-Price mill in Thunder Bay was chased out of his work place by anglophone workers.

In the Sault, the city council resolution specifically targeted francophone parents who sought their basic right to publicly funded French-language instruction for their children. This resolution was initiated by the Alliance for the Preservation of English in Canada (APEC), which has links with neo-Nazis. APEC claims that "English-speaking Canadians have been relegated to second-class citizens."

This is a baldfaced lie. Even as late as the 1970's, many Québécois were forbidden to speak French on the job and forced to "speak white" (English) to their foremen. Today, Québec's English-language minority enjoys much greater rights than those of francophone communities in English Canada, including access to their own hospitals, schools, colleges, and universities. Contrast the rights of anglophones in Québec with those of francophones in Manitoba, where the (once very large) francophone community was denied French-language schooling. Today, 30 per cent of Franco-Ontarians no longer use French at home.

Jean Castel, president of the French War Veterans Association, said, "The Quebec situation is quite different. If they (the Québécois) don't hold on to their language, it may disappear from the face of North America. Someone in Sault Ste. Marie is not in any danger of being assimilated by the French. For the Québécois, assimilation is a real threat."

In Québec, the renewal of anglophone chauvinism and the Canadian state's undermining of Bill 101 (a measure to preserve the French language in Québec) have contributed to an unprecedented surge in support for independence. Recent polls show that over two-thirds of the Québec population now support some form of sovereignty.

This nationalist reaction to anglophone xenophobia is partly being led by Québécois big business. The Bank of Montreal and the Merrill Lynch brokerage house note that "Quebec's independence movement is no longer being led by students and labor leaders, but by business, the middle class and capitalists."

New Democrats should know that their party leadership is not blameless in all this. While it is true that, in 1984, the then NDP government of Manitoba tried to entrench French-language rights in the constitution (leading to a racist backlash from Tory MLA's). The Federal NDP has always strongly opposed Québec's right to national self-determination although the majority of the NDP caucus in the House of Commons opposed the imposition of the War Measures Act in Québec in 1970. Even recently, Dave Barrett ran for the federal NDP leadership on an explicitly anti-Québec platform. Barrett made it clear that he felt the federal leadership was paying too much attention to Québec.

Yet there have been those who have fought for the rights of Canada's francophones and who do the NDP credit. Karl Morin-Strom, NDP MPP from Sault Ste. Marie, fought against the Sault's city council resolution before it was passed.

For its part, the Ontario NDP Left Caucus has always taken a principled socialist stand on this question, recognizing that Québécois national rights and the rights of francophones outside Québec are related. Our **Draft Manifesto for the NDP** asserts that "an NDP government will guarantee full rights to self-determination to the Québec and Native nationalities. We will guarantee and extend the linguistic rights of long-established francophone communities outside Québec."

NDP-Quebec resolution on Meech Lake Accord

The following motion was passed by the National Council of the NDP-Québec in November 1989. It was presented for adoption at the NDP Federal Convention last year by former NDP-Québec leader, John-Paul Harney -- but failed to pass. We present this for our readers as a genuinely democratic alternative.

WHEREAS constitutional negotiations which take place only among heads of governments contradict basic democratic principles and can only reflect the positions of the traditional parties: and
WHEREAS the Meech Lake Accord, like the Canada Bill before it, is the result of this type of bargaining and cannot be considered an acceptable substitute for a democratic constitutional process; and
WHEREAS the Meech Lake Accord ignores the existence of the Quebec people as a 'nation', just as it ignores the rights of native peoples, women and working people in general; and
WHEREAS the most recent convention of NDP-Québec, in reaction to the anti-democratic character and contents of the Meech Lake Accord, has come out against this accord and proposes in its place the development of a democratic constitution by a constituent assembly elected by the people; and
WHEREAS this position substantially reflects that of the trade union federations in Québec and of those other representative organizations across Canada whose goals are common with those of the NDP;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED
1. that the federal NDP reaffirm its fundamental commitment to democracy, whether in constitutional, political, economic or social matters;
2. that, consistent with this commitment, the federal NDP reject any constitutional undertaking unless it satisfies the following conditions: (a) that the process of constitutional development be totally democratic; (b) that it recognize both the existence of Quebec's people as a 'nation' and recognize their rights as such; (c) that it guarantee the rights of women and native people, as well as the right of Canadian workers to unionize and to collective bargaining; (d) that it guarantee all those other social and individual rights and freedoms already seen as just by all Canadians; and
3. THAT because the Meech Lake Accord does not meet these conditions, the federal NDP rejects it.

Meech deal: Quebec's needs remain unmet.

Has East Europe by-passed socialism?

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But what is much more likely to occur is the "Latin-Americanization" of East Europe. With the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as overseers, Bush, Kohl and company have cast their ravenous glances on the carcass of the East European economy, seeking to open new markets, exploit reservoirs of cheap labor and open new vistas for capital penetration in an ever-shrinking, increasingly competitive world. The parasitic relationship that imperialism has shown throughout its 100-year existence, sucking capital out of underdeveloped countries, distorting their economies, and making them dependent on manipulators of the world stock market prices will inevitably be duplicated in East Europe.

Poland is already in the experimental chamber. 300,000 people are now unemployed in a country which has never really known unemployment before - and the figure is inching its way up to 1,000,000 workers - 15% of the work force. On January 1, 1990, carrying out the dictates of the IMF, which has made foreign investment conditional upon policies resulting in social welfare cutbacks and price increases, the price of coal went up 600%, electricity 400% and bread 40%. No wonder the Solidarnosc-backed government's popular support is half what it was in March.

A market economy will eliminate unprofitable though socially necessary industries if no limits are placed on it. Artificial wants will be created through advertising. The production of profitable luxury goods will be given precedence over the production of inexpensive quality goods. Built-in obsolescence, a class of middlemen and speculators, erosion of labor laws, speed-ups in production -- these will be the "gifts" capital will bring as it penetrates into East Europe. The market economy will serve the interests of the wealthy, often former bureaucrats, at the expense of women, the young, the old, the disabled, the uneducated and those on fixed incomes.

With Stalinism discredited and capitalism unable to solve their problems, the European masses may well turn to the only remaining alternative -- socialist democracy. This vision mobilized hundreds of thousands of Czechoslovaks in a mass movement in 1968 behind the call for socialism with a human face. This is the vision which originally inspired the leaders of the Russian revolution before Stalin destroyed them, root and branch.

The objective basis already exists in many instances for institutions which can give workers control over their lives. In Czechoslovakia 10,000 strike committees could form the basis for direct workers' administration of their factories. In East Germany, though rare and isolated, workers' committees have appeared seeking control over the workshops. In Hungary, there have been motions toward the formation of workers' councils in the plants. In Poland, the fighting spirit that set Poland ablaze in the 1970s still smoulders.

As capitalism eats away at the gains made by the East European workers, workers' control and industrial democracy -- control of the productive units through workers' councils -- could then become the inescapable solution to the economic crisis. In place of bureaucratic planning, workers' planning is posed, based on a democratically determined plan to be decided on and approved by workers' representatives subject to recall on demand. Such new societies would become shining beacons, uniting both democracy and socialism, the two solutions to the burning problems of our age.

Workers' control can save environment

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pete for the provision of new electricity capacity by improving the energy efficiency of buildings. (Maybe my company will get the chance to get public funds to provide "free enterprise" electricity so I can keep my private profits.) It also advocates setting up other funds to "scan the globe" (will party loyalists get to do the scanning?), and again, about setting up "growth funds" for establishing business and employment opportunities. There is no talk about how this will be paid for, and the reforms could easily be implemented after the fact by a Tory or Liberal government aided by sound business supporters to help them spend the money. The most radical reform appears to be the establishment of a "green tax" for increasing government revenues from users of virgin paper, plastics and metals.

Looking at the **Executive Summary** as a whole, we see that the people who prepared it understood that the root cause of environmental distress is the organized greed that hallmarks capitalism. It looks like the writers lost their nerve when it came to spelling out remedies. There is no talk about workplace democracy. There is no consideration given to the idea that if workers control the operation of the plant and are told about the environmental implications of the plant's operations, then these workers would take the necessary measures to ensure that the enterprise operated in an environmentally acceptable way and that this would ensure the long term capability of the enterprise also. The report writers either did not know or, if they did, backed away from any radical changes in the economic system that would be needed in order to sustain a technological standard of living that will pose no threat to our physical well being.

There is a curious omission in the report. Although a lot of stress is placed on conservation, there is no mention of a policy with regard to future nuclear electricity generating facilities. It appears as though controversy was avoided by saying nothing about it, not even about the responsibility of the mining companies who have laid waste to large areas of Northern Ontario because economic changes would mean that shareholders' profits would be jeopardised if ore-refining chemicals could not be simply dumped into any convenient waterway.

Many of the statements are very naive; for example, it talks about Ontario becoming a "world leader" in developing "small, highly efficient urban autos and commercial vans fuelled by alternative fuels." Without a serious research and development policy, which in turn would mean a real commitment by the population at large to sustain such a program, it just ain't going to happen. It also discussed using natural gas as a fuel for transport vehicles because it produces less carbon dioxide than gasoline. True, but not by a large margin; also, if the majority of vehicles were fuelled with natural gas, how would this affect the supply for domestic space heating and other requirements for the commodity?

To sum up: Bob Rae clearly understands the underlying causes of our environmental crisis, but does he have the resolve and conviction to formulate the necessary economic policies that are needed to make the difference? It seems as though he may duck behind half-baked technical measures that sound good but are in reality subject to severe factual criticism. The NDP Left Caucus argues that the Party will get more respect and probably more votes if we base our program on economic reform based on workplace democracy so the people who make their livelihood in an enterprise can be totally responsible for the consequences, rather than the present system where the payback to remote shareholders is the prime criterion of economic viability.

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Kopyto not guilty -- a victim of law society's bias

By Gord Doctorow
Oriole NDP

Harry Kopyto, a prominent and active member of the Left Caucus Steering Committee of the Ontario NDP, was disbarred by the Law Society of Upper Canada on Nov. 8, 1989. The reason given was that Harry ostensibly defrauded the Ontario Legal Aid plan of some $150,000. The Left Caucus Steering Committee reviewed the Disciplinary Committee's Report, the report of Convocation (the group of lawyers selected by the Law Society to impose sentence), and the dissenting report of one member of Convocation, Thomas J. P. Carey. The Steering Committee decided to state its support of Harry in this clarifying article.

Harry Kopyto's fight is far from over.

It is ironic that shortly after the disbarment of Harry Kopyto by the Law Society of Upper Canada, this powerful group itself has been experiencing scandal and investigation of its practices. The Society is being scrutinized with respect to favoritism in prosecutions and improper procedures. Moreover, one of its most prominent members resigned in March after declaring personal bankruptcy. That bencher, Ian Outerbridge, had in fact headed the 3-person Discipline Committee that had investigated Harry Kopyto and recommended his disbarment.

The drama is clearly drawn by the clash of the two ideological protagonists: Harry Kopyto, the socialist radical lawyer who fights the system in the courts mostly through Legal Aid billings; and Ian Outerbridge, the quintessential corporate lawyer who made his money by representing such clients as Leonard Rosenberg, the convicted fraud artist who illegally used monies from Crown Trust Co. and Greymac Trust Co. to make speculator's profits on apartment buildings. Kopyto is forbidden to practice law. Outerbridge may continue despite the fact that there is a suspicion that hundreds of thousands of dollars, perhaps millions, have not been accounted for.

Two lawyers, both accused of mishandling funds, the Establishment lawyer judging the Anti-Establishment lawyer -- the punishments so different. Dissenting Convocation bencher, Thomas J. P. Carey, noted: "In concluding that the Solicitor [Harry Kopyto] must be disbarred the [Ian Outerbridge-led] Discipline Committee made *numerous derogatory comments* about the Solicitor calling him 'histrionic, bombastic', 'patently dishonest'. The Committee suggested that the Solicitor wanted 'to tear down and smash' the legal process. He was accused of 'repudiating himself with less difficulty and discomfort than is involved in changing his coat.' In my opinion these remarks ... *illustrate a level of antagonism toward the Solicitor that was inconsistent with an objective detachment and could only give rise to a reasonable apprehension of bias on the part of the Committee towards the Solicitor.*" [Emphasis added.]

In an article appearing in the Fall 1989 issue of **the Law Union NEWS**, put out by left-leaning lawyers and legal workers, Eric del Junco points out, "In a system as repressive and exploitative as ours, where the rules are so slanted in favor of the ruling elite, 'honesty' in its narrow sense of rule compliance is surely a relatively insignificant virtue."

Carey gives a careful refutation of the fraud charges against Harry Kopyto. He begins by pointing out that in the final version of the Agreed Statement of Facts (representing an agreement between Counsel for the Law Society and Harry Kopyto), both sides agreed to remove the suggestion that Harry "deliberately submitted inflated accounts". The word "deliberately" was removed, and "inflated" was changed to "inaccurate". Carey argues that the Statement of Facts merely indicate that Harry estimated his accounts and that there was no proof that he had acted to defraud the Legal Aid plan. He wrote, "I find that although estimating, the solicitor clearly believed in the essential truth of his accounts and therefore the facts do not fit into the definition of fraud. . *There was not one piece of evidence called by the Society's Counsel to repudiate the Solicitor or to suggest that he acted dishonestly for a dishonest purpose.* "

Summing up, Carey concludes the following. There was no evidence that Harry intentionally prepared false accounts. The evidence pointed to his good character and honesty. Harry's evidence was credible and had a reasonable probability of being true. No criminal charges have been laid against Harry, which is normal in cases of fraud. The ambiguity of the facts must be resolved in favor of the accused.

Why, if the dissenting report is so clear does Harry find himself in this predicament? Eric del Junco states: "I think an objective assessment of Harry's career will show that he has assisted our struggle by challenging judicial authority and legitimacy in a way that almost no other lawyer in this province has done, i.e. openly, flagrantly and even insolently. His 'Krazy Glue' remark is a perfect example. [This refers to Harry's denunciation of the courts as being warped in favor of the police, especially in its dealings with RCMP wrongdoings.] It was the sheer insolence of the remark that so enraged judges hearing the case, that made it so difficult for them to finally swallow the bitter pill and let him off. . . The reaction of the courts speaks volumes in relation to the question of the effectiveness of this method of criticizing the 'system,' i.e. it works and they don't like it." He concludes that the system is out to make an example of Harry to chill dissent among other lawyers.

Since Harry's disbarment, he has been forced to vacate his office as a result of pressure being applied by members of the legal establishment on Harry's landlord. He has been unable to secure bank loans. He has received no payment for Legal Aid billings for the last year and a half. And his request that the Law Society provide a statement of the cost they incurred in obtaining a forensic audit of his books (which he believes to be close to a million dollars), has been met with blunt refusal.

Harry's fight with the Law Society is far from over. This fall, an appeal will be heard of his disbarment by the Divisional Court of the Supreme Court of Ontario. There are strong and compelling reasons to have Harry back in the legal profession. In fact, a number of law students and teachers, as well as lawyers, are organizing a campaign to have Harry reinstated. Any contributions to help defray legal costs and statements of support can be sent to the **Harry Kopyto Defence Committee**, c/o Codina and Pukitis, 390 Bay Street, Suite 1708, Toronto, M5H 2Y2.

Labor needs NDP to be its political voice

By Gord Doctorow
Oriole NDP

Recently, a vice-president of the Canadian Labor Congress (CLC), who was also a recent NDP candidate, suggested publicly that the labor movement sever its ties with the NDP. John Fryer, President of the National Union of Provincial Government Employees (NUPGE), an umbrella federation of provincial government unions, announced that he thought that the CLC should become independent of any political party in order that it might more effectively lobby for its demands in the new political and economic climate.

He based his views on what he perceived to be the majority opinion of government-union members. Mindful of the deteriorating conditions of labor manifested through the ravages of free trade, unfavorable changes to the Unemployment Insurance Act plan, and an atmosphere of budgetary cutbacks in social spending, Fryer reflected the most backward pressures.

He argued that the attachment of the labor movement to the NDP was no longer relevant. Ironically, that was the position of the labor movement prior to the formation of the NDP in the early 1960's. Until that time, labor had tried to lobby governments, and in particular the Liberal Party, to get favorable legislation. Instead, the period of the late fifties was marked by anti-labor legislation. Even after the formation of the NDP, the labor movement, through its official bodies, was involved in various committees of collaboration with the federal government and corporate business. That ended only in 1976, when the Trudeau government had imposed wage controls. The CLC then withdrew from all these committees which did nothing more than restrain the labor movement in the mold of capitalist stability.

That bitter lesson for the labor movement led to increasingly close ties between the NDP and labor. While it may not have reflected it in terms of electoral results for the NDP by labor, it nonetheless created a different situation in Canada than exists in the U.S. Workers to our south have traditionally been tied into the kind of lobbying that Fryer thinks is so innovative and modern. The consequence has been a steady decline in the living standards of workers, both organized and unorganized, and a drastic reduction in the proportion of organized labor (currently below 20%). Their social programs are an international disgrace. By contrast, the collaboration between the Canadian labor movement and the CCF and NDP has brought about universal old age pensions, medicare, and in some provinces public auto insurance and denticare for children, among numerous other reforms which would be considered novel by our U.S. brothers and sisters.

Of course, the significance of labor's ties to the NDP is well understood by the top leadership of the CLC, who quickly attacked Fryer's suggestion. When, in the late fifties, the labor movement decided to fuse with the remnants of the old CCF parliamentary leadership, a new political force had come onto the political arena in Canada. Canada's labor party was born. The working class had acquired for itself a mass political party vying for power against the parties of Big Business. And not only the working class. Within the NDP, the demands for social justice of all the oppressed groups of society found expression: the Waffle's struggle for an independent and socialist Canada; antiwar groups which found expression in the NDP's anti-NATO/NORAD positions as well as its opposition to U.S. imperialism in the Vietnam War; women's groups through the NDP's pro-choice stance and struggles for equal pay; Native groups through the NDP's support of just land claims settlements and opposition to the NATO base in Labrador; and minority groups who are battling institutionalized bigotry based on racism, sexual orientation or disability.

The significance of the NDP lies in the possibility of fusing all these struggles into one giant struggle. This potential needs to be coupled with a labor movement prepared to mobilize around clear anti-capitalist demands in mass struggle instead of mere opposition to cutbacks or free trade. The NDP offers the perspective of a transformation of political power in the direction of socialist democracy through an alternative vision of a planned socialist economy democratically controlled by working people and their allies. The Fryers of the labor movement reflect defeatism, an inability to go beyond trying to ride the wave of the capitalist system even though it appears to be heading toward a recessionary tail-spin. The alternative lies within the great potential locked up in the labor-NDP alliance: combining the power of organized labor to turn around the situation of social inequality in Canada with a dramatic socialist program. That is what the Left Caucus stands for.

Left Caucus Newsletter

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